



Now Comes the Hard Part

Five Priorities in the Continuing Fight against Boko Haram

Jennifer Cooke | February 2016

[The following piece was published in the [Premium Times](#) and on the [CSIS website](#).]

Boko Haram militants launched a brutal assault on three villages just outside of the Borno State capital of Maiduguri on Saturday, fire-bombing houses, detonating improvised explosives and suicide vests, and leaving an estimated 85 to 100 people dead. Assailants reportedly seized food and livestock before torching the villages of Dalori, Walori, and Kofa. Military guards foiled an attempt to penetrate the nearby Dalori camp for internally displaced persons (IDPs), which houses some 22,000 people, among them 8,000 children, most of whom were rescued last year from Boko Haram-held towns. The Dalori attack is a stark illustration of the group's enduring lethality and of the continued vulnerability of Borno State communities. The Nigerian military has made important gains against Boko Haram, but there is a long way to go in protecting civilians and building toward a more enduring peace.

The Dalori attack comes little more than a month after President Muhammadu Buhari of Nigeria told a BBC interviewer that Boko Haram, as an organized fighting force, was finished. "Technically," he said, "we have won the war." Having pledged early in his tenure to defeat Boko Haram by the end of 2015, the president may have felt compelled to announce some sort of victory against the insurgency as the year came to a close. He went on to explain that Boko Haram is no longer able to launch "conventional attacks" or engage the military directly, but instead has been reduced to using improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and indoctrinating young girls—often 15 or younger—to detonate suicide bombs against unprotected civilians. In this, he is correct, although a "technical" defeat, as defined by the president, makes very little difference to the victims and families of Boko Haram's most recent attacks.

Nigeria has unquestionably made important headway against Boko Haram in the last 18 months, and that progress should be acknowledged and encouraged. Beginning in late 2014, the Nigerian government launched a more forceful and concerted military offensive on Boko Haram strongholds, bringing in private contractors to train an elite mobile strike force that used air and infantry assets to rout militants from towns they controlled and aggressively pursue them. With support from neighboring Chad, Niger, and Cameroon, Nigerian forces have wrested all but four Borno State local government areas (LGAs) from the control of Boko Haram, which at one point controlled 25 LGAs in three northern states.

On coming to office in May 2015, President Buhari promised a major overhaul of the counterinsurgency strategy, relocating the operation's command and control center to Maiduguri, prosecuting a major military procurement corruption case against the former national security adviser, and vowing to discipline security forces responsible for human rights violations. Many hundreds of Boko Haram members—and a number of their senior leadership—have been killed or captured since President Buhari took office, and the group no longer appears to have access to the kinds of equipment and weaponry it has had in the past. Modes of transport that once included tanks, armored vehicles, and Toyota Hilux trucks have been replaced by Volkswagen Golfs, bicycles, and, in some cases, horses. IEDs remain fairly unsophisticated, locally made with fertilizer and cooking fuel, packed into gas canisters or auto filters. Over the last month, the Nigerian Air Force has mounted a sustained assault on Boko Haram targets in Sambisa Forest, taking out "high value" individuals as well as fuel pumps, solar panels, and significant weapons caches. There

have been no video appearances by erstwhile leader Abubakar Shekau (or by any of his alleged impersonators) since early 2015, and the group's increasingly sophisticated media operation, which had reportedly received technical assistance from ISIL's publicity team, has gone largely quiet. Residents of Maiduguri describe vast improvements in the city's security environment: "Eighteen months ago, the city was a war zone," said one Maiduguri resident. "I was just waiting for a bullet to hit me—either from Boko Haram or the military." Today, businesses and health clinics have resumed operations. More and more schools are open, although a number of them have been temporarily converted into IDP camps. Public support for Nigeria's military forces is growing, and messages of encouragement and memorials for fallen soldiers are proliferating on social media.

Nonetheless, as the weekend attacks underscore, announcements of victory, technical or otherwise, are misleading. Boko Haram's strength was never as an organized fighting force, but as a fractured, ruthless organization, willing to inflict maximum damage on the softest of targets—school children, marketplaces, mosques, and churches. Its seizure of sparsely populated territory in the far North East had less to do with grand strategy and administrative capacity than with the weakness of the government's security presence in those areas. Suicide bombings and "hit and run" attacks on unprotected civilian targets have persisted as the group's tactical mainstay since 2010, and eliminating the capacity and opportunities for such attacks will be far more difficult than a territorial rout.

Moving Beyond a Technical Defeat: Five Priorities

There is broad consensus among policymakers and analysts that for sustained security over the long term, Nigeria will need to plan—and, when possible, rapidly implement—a comprehensive strategy that prioritizes civilian protection and improves socioeconomic conditions for impoverished communities across the North East. Infrastructure development, economic revitalization, transparent and accountable governance, and an end to corruption are all high on the priority list. At the center of that longer-term strategy must be a major effort to provide the region's youthful populations with improved access to quality education and economic opportunity. "Unless we invest massively in education," said Borno State governor Kashim Shettima in a recent conversation, "our security situation now is just an appetizer for future disaster." But those grand plans, while essential and laudable, will take considerable time to roll out and bear fruit—even if started with urgency. They are predicated on some modicum of security and a return to some degree of normalcy. Today, more than 2 million Nigerians remain displaced by Boko Haram. Four LGAs in Borno remain outside of government reach, and even towns like Dalori on the outskirts of a major urban (and military) center remain vulnerable. Counting on a comprehensive development and governance approach to secure the peace is just not realistic right now, but neither is a purely military effort to "destroy" Boko Haram.

In this context, deadlines and declarations of victory or defeat are not helpful: the challenge is to get to a degree of normalcy that will permit a more sustained governance and development solution. Getting to that point will likely be a long, uneven, and halting process. It will require a continued response from Nigerian security forces—one that is carefully calibrated and puts priority emphasis on civilian protection—and it will require greater government attention to five priority areas:

- 1. Prevent Boko Haram from regenerating.** Boko Haram has proved resilient in the past, and constraining its ability to regroup or resupply itself by drawing on regional networks and transport corridors is critical. Boko Haram members have always been able to move with ease across Nigeria's northern borders: to Chad (via Lake Chad and its many islands), to Niger, and through the heavily forested and mountainous areas that straddle the Nigeria-Cameroon border. Following the extrajudicial killing of founder Mohammed Yusuf in 2009, much of Boko Haram's leadership fled Nigeria across these porous northern frontiers. During that hiatus, Abubakar Shekau is said to have travelled to northern Mali and trained with the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO); other members reportedly travelled through Chad and Niger to train and fight alongside jihadist elements in Somalia, Algeria, and Afghanistan. They returned to

Nigeria in 2010, and Boko Haram reemerged as a far more deadly and sophisticated enterprise. Turmoil in Libya and the fall of Muammar el-Qaddafi in 2011 resulted in an additional influx of weaponry from Libyan arsenals and of Nigerian fighters (many Nigerians were members of Qaddafi's security forces), arriving primarily through supply routes in Chad. Today, as ISIL becomes an increasingly entrenched presence in Libya, it will likely become a magnet for Boko Haram fighters driven out by Nigerian and regional forces. This may appear to offer some respite to Nigeria, but if international moves against ISIL in Libya are eventually successful, those fighters are almost certain to return, and the possibility of an even more sophisticated, battle-hardened, and ruthless Islamist insurgency should be an issue of grave concern.

Essential to preventing regeneration of Boko Haram will be cooperation among Nigeria and its regional neighbors to block supply routes and exfiltration, eradicate rear-bases and training camps, and share intelligence on movements of fighters and on sources of funding and supply. The regional Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), which comprises Benin, Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria, was established to do just that. The task force has largely stalled, however, as distrust and mutual recriminations between Chad and Nigeria persist, and as differences in perceptions of threat, responsibility, and priority are hampering progress. Less than half of the task force's estimated \$700 million budget has been raised, and both Chad and Nigeria—where oil exports are the primary source of government revenues—are in fiscal crisis. Key diplomatic and security partners—including the United States, France, the African Union, and United Nations—will need to sustain diplomatic pressure for more robust and effective regional cooperation and ensure that those efforts are adequately and appropriately funded.

As important as blocking the physical ingress and egress of fighters and weapons from the region, the Nigerian government will need to launch a major coordinated effort to track and disrupt Boko Haram's domestic and international sources of finance. President Buhari has recognized this need—he underscored the point in his inaugural address—and the government should work quickly to strengthen and expand the capacity in Nigeria's Financial Intelligence Unit to lead a forensic investigation in partnership with domestic and international law enforcement agencies and financial institutions. The United States can play an important role in helping Nigeria map and disrupt terror funding flows and should assist in building institutional capacity to do so, in Nigeria and the broader region.

- 2. Strengthen intelligence through community engagement.** As Boko Haram reverts primarily to asymmetrical tactics, collaboration and timely exchange of information between security forces and communities takes on paramount importance. In the past, individual informants received little assurance from security forces of anonymity or protection from Boko Haram reprisals. Heavy-handed military tactics left civilians reluctant to engage or collaborate. Many Maiduguri residents credit the establishment of the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF), which became a link between communities and security forces, as a turning point in the city's security environment. The CJTF was initially a loosely knit group of volunteers who in 2011–2012 took up arms—sticks, machetes, and locally made guns—to protect their neighborhoods against Boko Haram. More important than their fighting capacity has been their willingness to provide information to the police and military, identifying Boko Haram members, tracing their movements, and turning over suspects to Nigerian security forces. Today there are some 24,000 CJTF members across Borno; the state government has begun to provide stipends to a small number (1,800) of trained and vetted members, but the vast majority continue to volunteer. The CJTF is not without problems. There have been reports of serious abuses (although commanders claim that they now have better disciplinary rules in place), and even the group's leaders worry about how these fighters—mostly young and unemployed—will ultimately be demobilized and reintegrated. "These boys feel strong and have a lot of responsibility at a young age," a CJTF sectoral commander told me. "If we tell them to go back to whatever they were doing before, they will surely become a nuisance in the

future.” Others worry that they could very easily be politicized and used as “protection” (read: “intimidation”) forces in local election campaigns and political debates. For now, the government and CJTF leadership will want to preserve the important surveillance function of CJTF volunteers, but should continue to strengthen lines of responsibility and accountability, to avoid creating a quasi-autonomous militia that could create potential security problems down the line. Ideally, adequately vetted members should have an opportunity to be integrated into security or civilian protection forces or receive enhanced training and livelihood opportunities as the security situation allows.

Beyond the CJTF, federal and state authorities will need to engage the broader public in an “all-hands-on-deck” approach to countering asymmetrical threats. Provision of information and messaging to North East communities was a particular weak spot of the previous federal government, and consistency and timeliness of messaging by security forces is still problematic. The Federal Ministry of Information has begun a promising series of radio and television public service announcements to raise situational awareness among civilians, with information on how to identify IEDs and potential suicide bombers and a call for greater vigilance on suspicious neighborhood activity. These efforts will need to be expanded to state and local levels and tailored to those communities most at risk. Building trust with communities, many of which have never benefited from government service or protection, will be a long-term process, but expanding mechanisms of communication and building the basis for an eventual culture of community policing should be an urgent priority.

- 3. Provide an off-ramp for Boko Haram fighters.** Even as it moves aggressively against Boko Haram targets, the Nigerian government will need to provide a process that makes surrender a more attractive option for current members and that offers some possibility of rehabilitation and reintegration for the many thousands of those who have turned themselves in or been captured. Boko Haram members are not an undifferentiated mass, and their reasons for joining fall across a broad spectrum. Within the group’s ranks are hard-line ideologues and criminal opportunists, leaders and followers, adults and children. Many were forcibly conscripted; others (including many girls and women) were kidnapped and subsequently indoctrinated; some joined for economic gain or a sense of empowerment. Even those members who were coerced into joining—or were underage—may feel “stuck” in the group, unable to return to their communities and fearful of being killed if they surrender. Many may see entrenching themselves further within the group as their only option. Sorting out categories of members and issues of culpability will be a long complex process that must also provide some sense of justice and accountability for Boko Haram’s victims. Such programs may not be politically popular, but peeling away adherents and would-be recruits will be a key part of weakening the Boko Haram brand.

A de-radicalization and counter-radicalization—or countering violent extremism (CVE)—program, initially launched by Dr. Fatima Akilu, former director of behavioral analysis in the Office of the National Security Adviser, includes prison-based de-radicalization and reeducation programs, community engagement programs, support and psychosocial counseling for traumatized populations, and post-traumatic stress counseling for victims and for Nigerian military forces. The status of these programs since Dr. Akilu’s dismissal in September 2015 has been somewhat in doubt, and the levels of funding and political support have been vastly inadequate for a program of such critical importance. Nigeria will need to rapidly expand the absorptive capacity of these programs, which could also provide an important source of insight and evidence for CVE programming in Nigeria and beyond. This is an area where international assistance and encouragement—including perhaps from the Nigerian diaspora—could be critical in providing support, profile, and much-needed technical assistance, particularly in building capacities for psychosocial support.

- 4. Don't forsake a generation of IDPs.** Two million Nigerians have been displaced by insecurity in the North East; among them are 1.4 million children. A small fraction live within government-sponsored camps; others have had to fend for themselves, melding into host communities or informal settlements. With insecurity and violence likely to persist, the needs of these citizens—whether they live in camps or not—will remain an urgent challenge. Many IDPs have been deeply traumatized and are—with good reason—wary of returning to their homes. In many cases there is little for them to go home to: villages and towns, homes, wells, and infrastructure have been destroyed. “My entire city, including me, has been living in Maiduguri for more than a year,” said the chair of Konduga LGA, which sits between Maiduguri and the Sambisa Forest and was a strategic target for Boko Haram. “There is nothing there.” The chair was accompanying a representative of the State Emergency Management Agency (SEMA) to an IDP camp in Konduga LGA with two truckloads of rice. Camps in and around Maiduguri are managed by state authorities and the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA). While they face considerable capacity challenges, they are nonetheless relatively better off than camps in outlying LGAs, which are managed by local authorities and SEMA and lack the logistic, security, and assistant support that the urban camps enjoy. The majority of IDPs have little certainty on when they might be able to return home, and there is a possibility that many will live in this displaced limbo for years to come. The international community, along with the Nigerian government and citizens, should rally to support these displaced communities, ensuring that the many children among them are given the education and services they need to thrive and eventually help rebuild the North East region.

- 5. Think beyond Boko Haram and beware of rising sectarian rivalries.** Boko Haram will remain a top security focus, but Nigeria will also need to be wary of becoming a proxy battleground for larger ideological and geopolitical rivalries. Competition between ISIL and al Qaeda—and between Iran and Saudi Arabia—could fuel increasingly deadly internal competition within Nigeria and at the same time draw the country into a diplomatic morass that could prove politically and economically costly.

Boko Haram and other Sahelian extremist groups have a long record of dynamism and opportunism. Internal disputes over ideology, ego, strategy, and leadership—and competition for profile, manpower, and resources—have ensured a continual fracturing and reforming of alliances and rivalries among them. Today, mounting rivalry between ISIL and al Qaeda could raise the stakes for jihadist competition even further. Boko Haram pledged allegiance to ISIL last year, renaming itself Islamic State West Africa Province. At the same time, al Qaeda's Sahel affiliates—Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), MUJAO, al Mourabitoun, and others—have reasserted themselves with high-profile attacks in Bamako and Ouagadougou, after being temporarily on the defensive following the French-led intervention into Mali. The quest for notoriety and one-upmanship among jihadist groups will have heavy and tragic human costs.

Compounding the possibility of sectarian and ideological competition is the rising assertiveness of Nigeria's Shiite movement. In November, Boko Haram claimed an attack against a members of the Islamic Movement of Nigeria (IMN), the country's largest Shiite organization, as they marched in an annual pilgrimage. Just weeks later in December, the Nigerian military killed hundreds of IMN members (the group claims as many as 700) in the North Central town of Zaria, flattening the movement's central mosque and gravely wounding its charismatic leader Ibrahim al-Zakzaky, who remains in detention. The massacre was ostensibly set off when IMN members blocked a convoy carrying the Nigerian Army chief of staff. That initial altercation left 10 protesters dead, but security forces returned to IMN headquarters that evening for the much larger assault. The government has remained largely silent on the real reasons for the massacre, but in private, federal officials hint at a serious and imminent threat from elements within organization, which to date has publicly professed a policy of nonviolence. An ongoing investigation may provide greater

clarity on the nature of the threat and the circumstances of the assault, but many observers worry that brutality of the military response could serve only to inflame and further radicalize Shiite elements, very much as the killing of Yusuf and his followers in 2009 generated a more vicious and violent iteration of Boko Haram.

A number of Nigerian analysts express concern that the Zaria incident—as well as the al Qaeda–ISIL rivalry—could draw Nigeria into a broader geopolitical and ideological contest. President Hassan Rouhani of Iran spoke to President Buhari following the Zaria killings, expressing his concern for the country's Shiite community and dismay that al-Zakzaky remained in detention. King Salman of Saudi Arabia called President Buhari shortly thereafter, reportedly expressing his support for the fight against terrorism and pledging greater cooperation. Speculation that Nigeria might join the Saudi-created Islamic Military Alliance against Terrorism, has stirred considerable consternation in the Nigerian media, and few Nigerian analysts want to see the country pulled into a geopolitical battle that could inflame inter- and intra-religious domestic divisions.

There will be no decisive victory in the long fight against Boko Haram in Nigeria. With the group now largely routed from the towns it controlled, the security situation in some ways has returned to where it was before Boko Haram developed territorial ambitions. Boko Haram is indeed weakened, but the government and its international partners must urgently block its capacity and opportunity to regenerate. This will require a shift from a “search and destroy” military mindset to a more multifaceted approach that prioritizes civilian protection and engagement, genuine collaboration with regional neighbors, and international cooperation to cut the group's financial lifelines. Only then can the much bigger task of economic revitalization and recovery fully begin. The hard part is still ahead.